

Obituary: John George Williams 4 April 1913–28 December 1997

Welsh, short, ebullient, irreverent and enthusiastic, John Williams died in late December 1997. The last in a long line of Africa's great collector-ornithologists that started in the 18th century. Like so many before him, he started as an amateur without academic qualifications in zoology. John Williams went to Africa as a young man in the RAF's medical arm during the Second World War. He fell in love with the land and when an opportunity to join the staff of the Coryndon Memorial Museum's (now Kenya's National Museum) arose after the war, his already profound general knowledge of natural history secured him the post.

Without question he was the right man in the right place at the right time. His predecessor had departed in a cloud of controversy, taking with him most of the museum's bird collection. This deprived the institute (perhaps *the* most important natural history museum in the tropics) of one of its most important assets. John Williams was an enthusiastic collector and immediately set about rebuilding the collection. In due course it was to become far more comprehensive than it had originally been and a particularly important reference base in African ornithology.

Williams was a broad-based naturalist and could have secured employment with the museum as a mammologist or entomologist. His knowledge of Africa's butterflies and moths was of the highest order and he was a true expert on the continent's bats. In both fields, he made new discoveries and contributed profoundly to our present knowledge.

It was John Williams' fate that his tenure as ornithologist coincided with the rise of African nationalism and the era of independence. Much as he loved the land of his adoption, he was one of those who was pessimistic about governance by untried Africans. In particular, he feared that natural sciences—such as ornithology—would not rank highly in the new order of priorities and that the collections so painstakingly built up would not subsequently be properly cared for. Ahead of his time, John was aware of just how fast habitats were changing and realised that many of the

specimens he had obtained could never be replaced as the species in question no longer existed where he had obtained them. Against considerable criticism, he deliberately shipped off some of the museum's more valuable skins to institutions that he felt had a more secure political future. While his decisions may still be questioned ethically, subsequent events have proved that his prediction of improper care was not entirely misplaced. Conservation and the welfare of natural history collections have not ranked highly in the face of Africa's huge economic woes.

John also correctly predicted that the 'job security' of expatriates such as himself could not be counted on and that if he was to remain economically buoyant he would have to fend for himself. In the mid-1960s he left the museum and established an advisory service for the wildlife-based East African tourist industry. *Inter alia* this soon illustrated both sound business acumen and his very broad general knowledge of East African natural history. Nowhere was this better reflected than in the Collins Field Guides to East African birds, butterflies and national parks which he authored.

Although Williams did not publish as widely in the scientific literature as he might have done, he nonetheless contributed more than any other individual in the past 50 years to the public's knowledge of East African birds. His greatest gift was in imparting enthusiasm—particularly to the young. He treated any specimen brought to the museum for identification or in donation as exceptionally valuable, making young donors feel that they were advancing science significantly. In contradiction of modern conservationism, he actively encouraged a 'hands on' approach to natural history. He avoided admonition not to touch or disturb, but in complete sympathy with youth's drive to be directly involved, he gently directed interests into responsible channels. In no time after taking up his position at the museum, he had a corps of youthful observers spread across the land. Like some Pied Piper and in a quite extraordinary way, John George—as many knew

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him—entrenched a lifelong interest in natural history to a whole generation. In turn this has had a profound influence upon the region's conservation.

One did not have to collect to benefit from JGW's (another nickname) interest or help, but if one did he imparted his own very high standards of specimen preparation. The lilt of his Welsh voice saying "sleep my pretty one; sleep!" as he laid a perfectly prepared specimen to rest in a drawer, or the naughty twinkle when referring to his august superior—Dr Louis B. Leakey—as our father which ought to be in Heaven, have stayed in many memories down the years. His irreverence was without malice and was part of the man's charm. Only one person could call him to order—

his deeply loved wife Philipa. Nothing brought John George closer to panic than the threat of reporting some 'less repeatable' quote to her. Ornithology has lost an important contributor, but few in the world of birds so genuinely warranted the sobriquet of irrepressible character.

John married Doctor Philipa Gaffikin in Cairo during the War. Philipa predeceased him and they are survived by one son and three daughters. John George Williams had a rich life well lived of which his descendants can be proud. To those of us brought up under his influence, he was truly one of the major landmarks in our lives. ☾

Ian Parker, January 1998.



Marsh Wren
by Terry O'Nele

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